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DRAMA AND MUSIC

THE ADVENT OF THE "Ballet Russe."—"Prince Igor" at
the Metropolitan.—"The Weavers" in English.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

At last we have seen the illustrious *Ballet Russe*, which for almost a decade has been stirring mightily the waters of European culture by its revolutionary exhibitions of scenic, choregraphic, and mimetic art and music; so that, even in barbarian America, the names of its chief deities—Bakst and Nijinski and Karsavina and Stravinsky—have become almost as familiar as those of our own beloved gods and goddesses of the films. And now Serge de Diaghilev has brought his famous organization out of a tragically preoccupied Europe and has deposited it upon our *boeotian* shores.

It is a pity that this celebrated institution (for such it has virtually become) has waited so long before seeking to penetrate the thickets of American culture; for, as a matter of fact, it had already, vicariously, accomplished that not very troublesome feat. The organization, with its startling adornments by Bakst, its innovations in dancing and pantomime, its brilliantly successful blending of dramatic, musical, and pictorial art, has long been a thrice-told tale; from New York to Greater Punxsutawney, from Boston to Painted Post, the word has gone forth, so that there is no lecture-course which has not paid its tribute to the fame of the Russian Ballet. As a result, we have become a little wearisomely over-familiar with its rumored excitements and innovations. Representation and report and an excess of exegetical comment have done too much for it. We have become so habituated to the characteristics of Léon Bakst's decorative genius through their influence upon lampshades and women's fashions, and through their imitators in

our own theatres, that the vividness of their address to us has become considerably dulled. Much of the thunder of the *Ballet Russe* was stolen years ago by the designers of wall-paper and parasols, to say nothing of Mme. Pavlova and her associates.

But all this should discourage no one from witnessing for himself the performances of this incomparable organization—the simon-pure, blown-in-the-bottle *Ballet Russe* of Serge de Diaghilev, which made its debut a fortnight ago in New York. It is, indeed, a true congeries of marvels: a magical blend of color and sound and movement—a gorgeous phantasmagoria woven out of hues and patterns that have the insolent and audacious splendor of barbaric music, of music that is as heightening and enriching color, of pantomimic dance that is dramatizing, poetizing, kaleidoscopically beautiful: that sends the fancy into a Never-Never Land of exotic and magnificent dreams,—a fantastic fairyland peopled by a dazzling and deliciously incongruous host: Arabian princesses and courtiers out of Versailles, black, lustful slaves, nymphs and satyrs out of the Golden Age, Arcadian shepherdesses, Pierrots and priests, Russian peasants and Tartar warriors, monsters and demons and enchanters, and fabulous birds with miracle-breeding plumage—a wonderworld of strange excitements and romantic loveliness and terror.

It is not to be denied that there are sources of disappointment. In the first place, this is not precisely that *Ballet Russe* that Europe thrilled to and extolled: its two chief members, the inimitable Nijinski and the scarcely less matchless Karsavina, are languishing abroad. In the second place, Stravinsky's music, so far as it has been disclosed to us at the moment of writing (in *L'Oiseau de Feu*), is remarkable only for its skilful, effective, and calmly unconcealed adaptation to his particular uses of the style that Debussy has made notoriously his own. And yet, despite its shortcomings, there are rare experiences, unforgettable artistic adventures, to be enjoyed at these performances. You will find nowhere else just this daring and eloquent harmonization of rhythm and color, tone and design, the same seductions for eye and ear. Above all, you will find here that supreme æsthetic achievement—an imaginative extension of beauty.

Considering the fugacity and congestion of human life,

there is really only one kind of music worth listening to: and that is music written by a genius. There would appear to be little occasion for exhibiting this seemingly elementary platitude; yet again and again we are asked to listen to music for a dozen other reasons than because it proceeds from a creator of genius. When the Metropolitan Opera House opened its doors to Moussorgsky's *Boris Godounov* a few years ago, the public took Moussorgsky and his opera to its heart with prompt and persistent enthusiasm. What portent, from the standpoint of the Metropolitan, could have been clearer? *Boris* was a Russian opera—therefore, why not produce another Russian opera, that cakes and ale and public joy might continue in the land? Pursuing this apparently sagacious counsel, the Metropolitan selected Alexander Porphyrievich Borodin's opera, *Prince Igor*, and it was duly produced in New York in the last week of 1915. Its reception by the public and those unaccountable but negligible functionaries, the professional reviewers, was one of considerably modified rapture. The reason can be very briefly and baldly stated. *Boris* was Russian, and so, indisputably, is *Prince Igor*; but besides being Russian, *Boris* was also a work of genius, and *Prince Igor* is not. Now, inasmuch as no one outside of our resident Russian population and a few inconsequential æstheticians and "intellectuals" cares a perforated penny whether *Prince Igor* was written by a Russian or a Chinaman, but only whether its music is dramatically stirring or beautiful, it is scarcely surprising that Borodin's opera has proved to be, for the general public, somewhat less than a second *Boris*.

Borodin was not primarily a music-maker. He was chiefly a man of science—a chemist and a physician. He was by no means, musically, a dilettante, a mere amateur: he has written music for the concert-room which displays both imagination and originality. But there is neither imagination nor originality in *Prince Igor*. Borodin died before he was able to complete the score, and it was finished by his friends Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazounov. The result is far from impressive. In style, the music, which is consorted with what we believe to be the stupidest libretto ever concocted for the operatic stage, is a curious blend of sweetmeats from Italy and spices from the Orient. That is to say, half of the music is damned by its conventionally mellifluous *cantilena* and half of it is saved, in a measure, by its

vigorous Asiatic rhythms. In artistic interest, the opera does not begin before the Polovtsian Ballet at the close of the second act, and it stops when this is over.

"*Prince Igor*," said Borodin himself, "is essentially a national opera, which can only be of interest to us Russians." Well, we are willing to let it go at that.

Mr. Emanuel Reicher's enterprise, "*The Modern Stage*," is now in its second season. He produced last Spring the *Elga* of Hauptmann and Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkmann*. Already this season he has given Björnson's *When the Young Vine Blooms* and Hauptmann's *The Weavers*. Björnson's play—a curiously flaccid and amorphous piece, mildly distinguished in style and as mildly amusing—has apparently been dropped out of the repertoire of the company. As for *The Weavers*, it is now a quarter of a century old; yet it belongs to our own time as essentially as if it had come only yesterday from Hauptmann's desk. That it deals with industrial conditions which, in their special relation to the miseries of the laborers in Silesia, no longer obtain, has nothing to do with the immutability of its appeal. "Organized efficiency" has done its work there, as elsewhere in Germany, since Hauptmann spilled his agonized pity for oppressed and suffering humanity into this poignant document of protest and revolt. But misery and injustice, oppression and hunger, industrial wrong and industrial wretchedness, are not yet quite eliminated from Browning's beloved and "best of all possible worlds" (would he call it so today, we wonder?); and so you can still watch, with unassuaged compassion, the slow and simple and grave procession of pitiful tableaux which Hauptmann passes before you in his five cumulative acts.

It would be idle to pretend that the play is pure gold throughout. It has its *longueurs*—not a few of them. Its movement is sometimes sluggish; it does not always escape dullness. Like many masterworks, in and out of the theatre, its rewards are not at every moment in proportion to its exactions. It is performed by Mr. Reicher and his associates with admirable skill and complete devotion—though in an English version that leaves a number of things to be desired.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.